

Letter to the Editor - From: Dr Jane Orton

I would like to address the letter to the Editor in the 13 November, 2008 issue of ACSSO Language Education in Australia (Vol. 2, No. 15) by Dr Lijian Hong of Monash University, headed in reference to Demand for Asia Study Overhaul, an article in The Sunday Age (12-10-08) outlining a summary of findings from a report I have recently completed, Chinese Language Education in Australian Schools.

"When I read Jane's interview in the Age, I found it very confusing. What is this notion of 'Chinese teaching Chinese?'" Dr Hong asks, and then goes on to make a number of critical comments.

It would appear Dr Hong has not read my report, although it is available on a number of websites including the Chinese Language Teachers Association of Victoria's webpage on the MLTAV website. This is a pity, as referring to the primary source would have provided some answers to the questions she raises and allayed some of her fears. What she has read, it seems, is just the article, for which the journalist drew on the report's Executive Summary (not supplied to him by me).

Dr Hong's first question asks how I can use the word "Chinese" students when there are several possible referents. In the report, the different kinds of Chinese learners in Australian schools are described and distinguished at length, making very clear the difference between classroom learners of the language, primary students who have spoken Chinese of some variety since birth, and students who arrive in Australia during their secondary schooling having grown up in a Chinese society and been educated in a Chinese medium school.

Dr Hong's method in the remainder of the article is to raise a number of questions in the negative. Thus she asks, "Is there anything wrong to offer Chinese Australian kids (heritage language learners) to learn Chinese as a community language?", and, "Don't we have the obligation to provide these [international] Chinese school kids a language maintenance program for them while they study in our country?" She does not refer to any evidence supporting these as problems, but the inference is that in the report I have said something to the contrary. This is not the case.

A very significant part of the report is devoted to the separate needs of each of the three types of learner if they are to develop their Chinese as we would want them to do, and to their rights to be taught in school what they need to achieve that. Thus it calls for three streams of curriculum and assessment in Chinese. Furthermore, the report states that heritage language learners "need to be recognised as a very valuable group: they are local graduates who will form the base of a bilingual, bicultural professional pool. Proficient in Chinese and personally familiar with and competent in the Australian education system, the[y]...are the obvious best recruitment target for future teachers of Chinese." (p.33) It also advocates that learners from all three streams, that is, including international students, be able to continue their language development "in appropriately tailored streams at university [with] up to four years of worthwhile study available to them. The point would be to nurture their development." (p. 34)

As for an understanding of Chinese society in its present and historical form, Dr Hong asks: 'Isn't it a good opportunity for us to provide these schools kids different views about China and its history, culture, society, politics, economics, etc and help them to build up a critical approach both to target and home culture, their own "third place"?' At the start of the report it states the goal as "to begin, as a matter of urgency, to develop a significant increase in the number of students taking Chinese to the end of secondary school, who have learned it well, a learning grounded in sound contextual studies of Asia." (p. 10) It also states as one premise underpinning the entire report that, "achieving proficiency in intercultural interaction, requires a parallel development of

learners' self-awareness about their own culture and society, and about how these are also reflected in language." (p. 12) Such targets are proposed for all streams of learner.

The one point we very clearly differ on is complacency about a 94% drop out rate from Chinese by classroom learners (those who do not speak Chinese at home). "This is normal," Dr Hong states. No, it is not. Though it is certainly the current situation, and it is appalling. Chinese is demanding, but it is not that hard! To say this is not to suggest the opposite: that all who start will reach the heights of proficiency, but if there were different streams, if it were well taught as a foreign/second language, and if there were sufficient time allowed for it, the continuation and success rate would be considerably higher. So while it is good, as Dr Hong adds, that there is an increase in background speakers studying Chinese in Australia, this simply begs the question in relation to how we might increase the numbers emerging from the education system who are proficient in Chinese. The only feasible way to increase the numbers to the level the government and business community are calling for, whether we increase the number of programs or not, is to raise the rate of continuation and the level of success of those who begin Chinese as a school subject.

Dr Hong concludes that "What we really need is to have a "paradigm shift" in Chinese teaching rather than "service pack" solution. It would be very interesting to see more people to be involved in discussions and debating issues of Chinese teaching in Australia." She does not explain what she means by the first of these statements, nor how it is intended to be related to my report, but I can assure Dr Hong that the 45 senior educational systems administrators from around the country who discussed and debated the report and its findings at a National Forum at the Asia Education Foundation in Melbourne on 28 October, were fully involved, and very keen to make a significant change in what it means to offer Chinese in Australian schools, as the report advocates.

The Forum Report will be available on the CLTAV section of the MLTAV website and the AEF website in early December. ('MLTAV' info@mltav.asn.au ; www.asiaeducation.edu.au)

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To access Dr Orton's Report "*Chinese Language Education in Australian Schools*" (October 2008):
http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/pdf/reports/chinese_language_education_in_australian_schools.pdf